

An Interview with Petra Leutner

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Abstract:

Professor Petra Leutner is a famous professor of aesthetics with research on fashion study, vision and poetry. On Sept.25, during the International Symposium of “Contemporary Aesthetics and Anthropology—Fashion Study”, co-hosted by the School of Media and International Culture of Zhejiang University and Zhejiang University Of Media And Communications, I got an opportunity to interview her. Our conversation mainly focused on the topic of the study of fashion theory, covering a wide range, including the relationship between fashion and clothing, empirical aesthetics in Germany and so on.

Key Words:

Fashion theory; cultural anthropology; empirical aesthetics; Marxist aesthetics

Wang Jie: Very nice to meet you here! I heard your lecture in the conference and I am quite interested in it. Your speech is titled “Toward an Aesthetic of Clothing and Fashion” and could you please summarize your basic theoretical characters of fashion and clothes aesthetics?

Prof. Petra Leutner (hereinafter to be referred as Leutner) : First of all it is necessary to make a difference between fashion and clothing. Clothing in general, is a matter of culture anthropology; fashion of fashion theory. Clothing is a very old phenomenon since the beginning of manhood if you want to see it like that. And fashion, for Western culture, in the sense of an institution of society, started in the 19th century, when industrialization begins. Fashion was growing and getting its character like it has today. So, there are two different aspects of clothing: clothing, in a wider notion, including any sort of costumes, and clothing as fashion. Fashion is something more special, volatile, and it is necessary to use other methods to analyze it.

Wang Jie: What new and important theoretical issue could be developed from the connection between fashion and clothing?

Leutner: One important point is the relationship between body and clothing, and the relationship between body and fashion. It is fundamental to look at clothing and fashion as two aspects of aesthetic practices that deal with the body. That's what cultural anthropology and fashion theory have in common: the research about the art of human body. We should think about the body and the clothes as a consistent form. In German you can call it “Gestalt”. Another important point is that you can analyze for example the social function of pajamas when you look at it as fashion

and as clothing as well. It is important to consider the differences between fashion and clothing but then connect them again.

Fashion theory, of course, has some different approaches to think about clothing and fashion. Simmel for instance considered fashion's capability of demonstrating the social distinction between the classes. The highest class creates a new fashion as soon as the lower classes are following and wearing the same clothes as she does. The German fashion theorist Gertrud Lehnert focuses on fashion as a cultural and aesthetic practice in every day life. It is necessary to stress this aesthetic impact of fashion. The American fashion theorist Valery Steele explains the meaning of symbols for fashion, especially erotic fetishes. Others are researching about the role of gender in Western history and about new sexual identities in fashion today. Many German fashion theorists also demand strategies of sustainability for the fashion system.

Wang Jie: Could you please introduce your fashion study and the approach to your study to our Chinese colleague?

Leutner: I try to explain that fashion system today is working in a special way. It developed in analogy to the art system even though in some aspects they are very different. Since the end of the 19th century, you have the autonomous art system and artists started to make their art pieces for the avant-garde movement. Arts started to be free, no longer dominated by church or politics. When Georg Simmel in 1905 wrote his text "The Fashion", he explained which role fashion was playing in society, and I guess, he described the start of the fashion system, its roots. Fashion expanded in the 20th century, later than the art system, but it developed somehow in a very similar way. In some aspects today it follows the art system.

The fashion system in the 20th century became more and more complex. After the World War II, Paris was the main city for fashion, the fashion center, and it was decided in Paris, who can be successful as designer and who cannot. Only if you made collections for high fashion, you got the permission to show your work in Paris. But then there was a strong diversification for several reasons, for instance because of the increasing power of subculture, and things changed. Since the 1980s we have more and more fashion centers, like Milan, Berlin, New York, London, and the domination of Paris declined. The media manifold and became more democratic. Movies, TV, and later blogger started showing fashion and were talking about it. So the fashion system became a very important economical and "trendy" part of daily life in Western society. But fashion is not only business, it is youth movement as well, and it started to be autonomous like art, which means you can design dresses that are treated like art pieces and are sold directly to museums without reaching the market.

Today, fashion system and art system mix more and more, even if there are lots of differences of course. For example, fashion is changing again and again, art pieces should last forever. But to be treated like art means a chance for fashion, because otherwise fashion increasingly tends to be just business, being produced

by brands for economical reasons, and creativity is eliminated. Fashion now can be art of the body on the one hand and economical factor on the other.

Wang Jie: What is your opinion about Prof. Wu' s keynote speech?

Leutner: It was interesting for me to see, that she wants to combine traditional clothing and modern fashion, she tried to go back and look for ornaments from costumes and transform it into actual fashion. But I got the feeling, perhaps, it could be too local. In the discussion she told me she would also use ornaments and symbols from different cultures and try to connect them. This is necessary for fashion today. Because if you only look at your own tradition, you cannot really reach aesthetic freedom and you cannot create new forms. And if you want to be part of the global market, you need to connect the local and the international and you have to look at culture in an unexpected way. You have to find a language to express what will happen in the future.

Wang Jie: I agree with you that Prof. Wu' s report is too local and national. And I think, she laid too much emphasis on economic and social interests, mainly to make more money and to benefit more from the industry. In this case, aesthetics factor is not enough. In aesthetics theory, her work has a lack of creativity, which I think is also the general problem in current Chinese intellectual industry. Talking about the relationship between fashion designer and aestheticians, there is always a discrimination that fashion designers tend to look down upon and pay little attention to aestheticians. The old impression and misunderstanding still remains in the minds of artists, that Chinese aestheticians are so constrained and conservative, which changes a lot definitely.

Leutner: In Prof. Wu' s report, she was talking about the print, the pattern and the ornament, but not enough about form and shape. The form is the essential innovation for fashion. In Germany, fashion designers and aestheticians often try to work together. In their studies, young designers have courses on aesthetics and are strongly inspired by philosophers like Kant, Nietzsche, and by deconstruction. In our university they also work about the sublime, beauty and subculture and make a lot of experimental designs. I think this is very important, because you see more when you think more. A lot of famous designers are getting their inspirations from art history, from philosophy and so on. Iris van Herpen, the Dutch designer for instance - I showed two photos of her dresses made with 3D printer in my report - works together with technicians, with scientists, with artists. This cooperation is very important.

Wang Jie: In the field of fashion study, Germany has its own traditional advantages. Could you please make a comparison between Germany, France and Great Britain, in the field of fashion study?

Leutner: In France, I would say, fashion is an important part of cultural heritage. There is a long tradition with the best tailors, craftsmen and workers. High fashion in France is not reached in Germany but German theorists are intellectually strong. An important French book about fashion is called "The Fashion System" (1967) from aesthetician Roland Barthes in tradition of structuralism. His research points out the significance of the combination of fashion writing and fashion photography to declare what is fashion. In Great Britain, fashion has its own style. The British street fashion is quite powerful, punk aesthetics for example had a strong impact on collections of Vivienne Westwood or Alexander McQueen, and there is also the very British tradition of Burberry's. The theorist Dick Hebdige published excellent books about fashion and subculture. As for German fashion studies, Henry van de Velde, one of the forefathers of Bauhaus, put it in 1902, we cannot make fashion like in Paris but we try to catch up with. Now Germany is on the way to make Berlin a fashion center and we have really great designers there. And German fashion theorists like Gertrud Lehnert or Barbara Vinken for example are writing about the impact of new gender identities on fashion. Sustainability in Germany is an important aesthetical and political issue as well and the topic of the fashion system, in tradition of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory either.

However, Europe is so international today that it is difficult to declare what is French fashion or German fashion. For instance, Karl Lagerfeld, the chief designer of Chanel, one of the most important French brands, is German. So, it is all mixed up. European fashion studies and American fashion studies also interfere with each other, for example, the New Yorker theorist Yuniya Kawamura wrote an important book about the fashion system. Do you have any idea about German fashion or European fashion? Perhaps, the names of labels, how do they work in China?

Wang Jie: I used to work in Shanghai, an international city, where you can see a lot of international labels, covering perfume, shoes, clothes, bags and so on. In my opinion, Chinese new generations are searching hard for Western fashion today. In this case, cultural revitalization, invoking culture self-consciousness, is necessary I think.

Leutner: I agree fashion can open the mind for aesthetics in general and it is training the taste. It is a problem that people always think fashion would be just a sort of personal expression, of showing individuality. That's one aspect. But the other side of the matter is that in our daily life fashion is a representation of aesthetics, or as beauty or as provocation and ugliness.

Wang Jie: There is a strong tradition of empirical aesthetics in Germany, which still play an important role today. Could you please talk more on this and the representative figures?

Leutner: Empirical beauty studies want to find out by experiment whether there exist universal principles of beauty or not. At the university of Regensburg they

used morphing practices to make average photos of faces, and showed them to several persons, and they should decide whether they like it or not. The research was also about the base of attractiveness and sexual attraction.

Another theorist, Winfried Menninghaus, is working on similar topics. He is now the director of the Department of "Language and Literature" at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics. Formerly he was writing about absolute poetry but then he followed up with reading the evolution theory of Darwin. Even Darwin claimed, the power of beauty would have been starting at the beginning of evolution. But beauty for him means the media for sexual attraction, which is necessary for mankind to reproduce. In his book "The promise of beauty" Menninghaus wrote about this topic. His research about the sources of beauty as sexual attraction focuses on this field.

Wang Jie: What is the connection between empirical aesthetics and fashion design?

Leutner: I think, there is no direct connection. However, some empirical aestheticians also have the opinion, if you look better, you are more successful. In this sense the designers would try to make people more attractive. But in fact, this opinion is too simple.

Wang Jie: You showed me some brilliant works, made by the students in your college, and I am quite interested in where their ideas or inspirations came from.

Leutner: For example, one of our students was inspired by Iris van Herpen but she did not want to make her collection with machine, she made it by hand. Another example might be a better one. The students got their idea from the Domsday prophecy of the Bible, when everything is destroyed, that you go back before the start of civilization and clothing is the shelter. Sometimes it seems that fashion designs come out by accident. However, when you look deeper, you will find out it is a very new and appropriate understanding of society or culture.

Wang Jie: I think so. And for cultural revitalization, it does not only mean you simply transform traditional symbols to fashion design, does not only mean you read the poetry of Tang Dynasty or wear Hanfu, a traditional Chinese clothing. It should be expressed in a modern way, applicable to our contemporary life.

Wang Jie: In your presentation, you discussed the relation between technique, art and beauty. In your opinion, fashion means more of technique, but not art. However, with the influence of aesthetics capitalism, fashion is considered as art by the young and also by some scholars. Could you please further explain your opinion and your comment?

Leutner: I did not mean fashion is only technique. I try to show that at this

stage there are some fashion designers, like we heard yesterday, Alexander McQueen for example, who opened a very special field between fashion and art. They do not make only technique, crafts or something, but they are also artists. I want to show, fashion and art, now together, may open something new. Because art has also changed a lot and goes more and more in the direction of applied works like design. Technique is necessary for fashion and for art as well.

Wang Jie: For me, from the the point of view of Marxism, all works with creativity can be regarded as arts and doing art work is not the privilege of artists. I mean, any work, as long as combined with aesthetic taste or aesthetic form, can be art. So, I think, there is not a clear line between art, fashion, movie and so on. The difference between art and not art today, I think, does not lie in the form nor the technique, but something compound, I would like to call it the integrity of aesthetic experience. The viewers know the creator once they see the work.

Also, I think, artists should not be grouped into a special party. Artists being regarded as a particular group is the problem that China today needs to solve urgently. Our society is making art and artists more mysterious. The reality is, for many films and paintings, they have only the extrinsic features of art but not the soul or spirit. They are made out of a production line, with no artist's personal styles or characters integrated into. The mystification of art reveals the fact that art is under the control and being used by the capital. Artists, working together with the capital, make great profits. On this point, I really want to know the situation of artists in Germany, do they also make a large sum of money?

Leutner: You mentioned a lot of arguments. I guess, not everybody can write poems like Charles Baudelaire. We urgently need artists as specialized persons, who seriously work for beauty, for form. Only a few people have the artistic talent and capacity to purchase perfection with passion. You have to be patient and to suffer for this aim. Young artists usually earn no money at all. I don't know exactly how the market in China works. In Germany, art market goes up and down and you have some well-paid artists, which is a fact of course, but you can also find a lot of artists who just work because of their creativity. They can fortunately survive, because we have a lot of competitions and scholarships, which the artists can get a reward from. They do not make big money but they are good and we need them all as well as the few "stars". Capitalism makes a mystification of the star system for its profit, that's true.

Wang Jie: In your presentation, you mentioned the relationship or some kind of connection between fashion and death. In our academic world in China, our scholars are familiar with Martin Heidegger's proposition "being towards death". The connection between fashion and death is new for me though I also notice some teenagers today wear clothes with death symbols. Can you talk more about the connection between fashion and death?

Leutner: Yesterday I showed a painting from the surrealist artist René Magritte, called “Homage to Mack Sennett” (1934). The Belgian artist painted a dress hanging in a wardrobe, still showing the traces from the woman’s body who was wearing it. In this sense, clothes can be a sign for absence, even for death. The dress remains, the person is absent. The dress, a symbol for the remaining and the death as well, reminds both, eternity and death, the frailty of our bodies. In German literature the dress as outer shell has a long history as in Goethes “Faust II”, when Helena dies and leaves behind her veil as a symbol for classical beauty.

In fashion, this significance returns. The clothes are like a second skin, a dead skin. This dead skin has something of horror. The symbol, that comes from clothing, now goes into fashion. Sometimes as an ornament, or in another way: the designer Martin Margiela buried a dress and dug it.

Some philosophers like Walter Benjamin bring forward other arguments. They say fashion symbolizes death because it changes so fast. This coming and going would remind us of death. In this sense fashion as an institution represents our unexpressed relation to death.

Wang Jie: I agree with your opinion. In ancient China, people used to commemorate their relatives by wearing accessories as symbols, like a jade. But in contemporary era, young people wear clothes with skulls, I think, because they have some horror or panic in their mind. The clothes is just a reflection of their inside feelings. Fashion is related to a nation or the dream of an era, could you please talk more about this, about the connection between fashion and Utopia?

Leutner: Fashion represents, of course, identities, but I would not say of a nation, maybe of culture in general. Because nations, in Western society, are so mixed, even if some people want to push nationalism. In your lecture yesterday, you said it is very important to have these national feelings. In Germany, looking back to the Nazi ideas, the intellectuals don’t agree anymore with nationalism. You can find clothing as the expression of a nation, of an identity or an era, like in historical ruptures comparable to the French revolution. But today the aesthetic and economical impact on fashion is so huge that this national identity is only a small detail. Fashion looks at its own history, what was fashion before, which aesthetical strategies will raise in future, what is doing art and so on, these are more important influences on fashion in Western culture than the expression of a nation. Some designers may use a national flag only as an ornament.

Yesterday, in your lecture about the movies, you showed a positive feeling to nationality. Do you have any idea how we can bring a positive national identity?

Wang Jie: The movie Wolf Warrior, I mentioned yesterday, is a fashion in China now and it is about a heroic figure in Chinese army. One scene of the movie is important that the western soldier is fighting the hero, a Chinese soldier. At the beginning, the western guy said the Chinese is a low-grade nation; but when he was beaten, the hero counterattacked him with a line, “we were weak in history, but

not now.” In the aspect of aesthetics and culture, since the Opium War in 1840s, China had turned to follow the west for a very long time, seeing western fashion as fashion only. The reasons are complicated, but I think, the main reason behind is Darwinism, which was seriously believed by the western world and also by a few Chinese scholars, including Lu Xun, Guo Moruo in the May 4th movement. However, with the increase of GDP, our self-consciousness is also growing up and we now believe that we are stronger than before.

So, I think the movie has some positive meaning, like a sigh claiming that we are standing up, not only politically or economically, but also in culture and in spirit. While, in the movie, there is also another line in heated discussion, “Even though a thousand mile away, the man who affronts China will pay”, which I do not quite agree on. Nationalism has both sides, of course. Controlled by political force, it can turn to be a disaster.

Leutner: Yes, nationality has both sides and I think it is hard to find the balance. And as for Utopia, I guess, art, beauty and form, always have a relationship to Utopia. Because you can find, like Theodor Adorno said, in the whole aesthetic field, poems, art and fashion as an illusion of a better world.

Wang Jie: Germany is a nation who is particularly good at philosophy. I used to study philosophy, from Simmel, Bloch, Adorno, Benjamin to Habermas. They all play important roles in China’s academic world. While, in contemporary German philosophy, in your opinion, what is the most important and powerful theory?

Leutner: Habermas has still a lot of scholars. I also visited his seminar in Frankfurt. But there was in that time a conflict between French philosophy, deconstruction, and the Critical theory. Parts of the young German students turned to the French philosophy, especially in Frankfurt, where I was studying.

Wang Jie: You said the young German generation turn to “deconstruction” and I am interested in who is the most influential?

Leutner: I think Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and nowadays also the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. In my impression, the German aesthetics now works like bricolage. Bricolage, a notion from the French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who wrote the book “The Savage Mind” (1962), is used to describe that someone does not have a logical, straight method, taking associatively some thoughts from any theory and put them together in a new form. Bricolage means an experimental thinking, you don’t know what’s coming next. It is productive because of its lack of systematic or analytical procedure.

Wang jie: In Chinese academic world, we also have a tendency, for research and study, the newer the better. The research of many Chinese scholars has the feature of fashion that they change their research area frequently without a confirmed root.

Leutner: I am curious about the root of Marxist aesthetics now.

Wang Jie: I think, the root of Marxist aesthetics is to criticize capitalism. As long as the capitalist production exists, so does Marxist aesthetics. You come from Karl Marx' s hometown, can you talk about your opinion on Marx' s thought and Marxist aesthetics, are you influenced by Marx' s thought?

Leutner: When I was young, I liked Marxism, we were very critical about capitalism. It was necessary in Germany, because after the World War II the fascist ideology still found its position in society. We were very convinced of these Marxist ideas. However, with the development of society, we changed our attitude. But it was a very important point in my life. Today, I guess it is easier to criticize the economic structure with Marxist ideas than to work with it on the aesthetic field. And capitalism is so complex today and even the opposition force, from the poor worker, does not function anymore. As Michel Foucault said, the power is everywhere. In Germany today, I think, nobody has the right theory on Marxism, nor on Marxist aesthetics.

Wang Jie: When it comes to aesthetics capitalism, I agree with Prof. Assouly. We believe that the working class is no longer the opposition force to capitalism and instead there would be another growing new force. Perhaps, in China, with the development of Internet, the voice of the young generation and the peasantry can be heard by our government and our society. Aesthetics capitalism, I think, deserves our long-term diligent research.

Leutner: The problem of Marxist aesthetics is, I think, it cannot explain the main aesthetical problems. Because it looks only to the point of criticizing the reality. But in art, there are a lot of questions of form, problems like how to present an actual and important shape of beauty for instance. These problems cannot be explained by Marxist aesthetics. But I also see Julia Kristeva, as a member of editorial committee of the journal *the Research on Marxist Aesthetics*. I do not know and I am wondering if she is a Marxist, is it a new form of Marxist aesthetics?

Wang Jie: I read from western books, in which Julia Kristeva is classified into the school of Althusser, though the connection is not so close. We have a narrow and a broad definition of Marxist aesthetics. In my opinion, even Jacques Derrida can be seen as a Marxist to some extent.

In addition, Marxist aesthetics needs to be modified, which is the task for our scholars today and we are faced with new social reality, new aesthetics problems and new affect structure. There are generally three ways to study Marxism or Marxist aesthetics in China today. One looks into the classical works of Marx and perform Marx' s thoughts mechanically and dogmatically in contemporary society. One puts stress on the localization of Marxism or Maoism. For me, I have been studying Marxism

for almost thirty years and I do not need to quote the classics anymore. With Marxist theories internalized, my concern is on the new problem and how to solve it. My academic career follows the path and I think I am the third party, a minority.

Leutner: Then why are you interested in fashion?

Wang Jie: Originally, I did not pay much attention to fashion and only read sporadically about fashion. In February, I went to Belgium and visited Prof. Ching Lin Pang, who suggested me to hold a symposium on fashion in China. Once I started to do some research on fashion a few months ago, I found it interesting and of value in both theoretical research and actual practice. It is an agreement on the conference that fashion deserves of study, especially in contemporary China. I will keep working on it.

Leutner: There were a lot of essential questions asked from the professors and scholars after my report yesterday. It is impressing that they are so interested in fashion studies.

Wang Jie: Anthropology, as a theoretical research method, can you talk about the future of it in the field of fashion study?

Leutner: In Germany, cultural anthropology is a very important part of research for history of clothing. It asks about how people use special material and so on. However, I get the impression that, in China, anthropology is more directed to culture heritage and tradition. Maybe, there are different views on anthropology in China and Europe. For me, anthropology, in the study of fashion and clothing, is also important, when thinking about the relationship between body and clothing in general. In this sense, I think, it would be better, anthropology be a part of fashion theory. Otherwise, it could be misunderstood.

Wang Jie: I am now using a new method, very different from the traditional one, to analyze newly-released films. I call up people with different knowledge backgrounds, of different ages together, to discuss a new film. As newly-released, there is an uncertainty about the significance of the film in Aesthetics. The method, a kind of field study I think, can find us a new way about how Aesthetics help solve our problems in contemporary era. I would like to call it, Aesthetic anthropology, which is, far from metaphysical, but concrete and gives you the feeling of being present. And the discussion, does not aim to represent the original scene, but to create something new through communication.

Leutner: I agree with you and I also want to say something about the connection between luxury and culture heritage. We had the lecture by Fang Lili and I agree with her on most points except one. The situation is, when you find out the old traditional strategy, you know how to make the clothes by hand, do you still make the crafts by hand even today? Now we have machines, which make things more quickly and cheaper. My question is that, if still made by hand, will traditional crafts, when they are working today for fashion, be too expensive and turn to be a luxury, only the rich can afford and use as a way to show off? What can we do with these crafts today?

Wang Jie: I think this question has something related to Prof. Assouly's opinion, aesthetics capitalism. In contemporary China, there is a phenomenon that capital and culture are combined closely to cook up some goods. Many scholars, working together with capital, do not have their own standpoints, express the government's willing, and benefit from speaking for the capital. The hand-made crafts you mentioned, are varied in quality. Quite a lot are made out of routinization, without creativity. However, tourists from abroad, who know little about this, pay much more regarding the crafts as art or fashion, full of Chinese charms. The industry and GDP are going up, but can these crafts really be regarded as arts? In the summit of G20, I bought a set of porcelain in Hangzhou, made my machine, quite exquisite and delicate. I think this is the new trend.

It is a pity that time is so limited. Still, I want to know your opinion or suggestion for our conference, and your opinion as well on my lecture yesterday.

Leutner: The conference, for me, was very interesting. I got a lot of new inspirations and impressions. I learned about the thinking in China, about cultural and Aesthetics anthropology. China is so big that I get the impressions that there are many different ways to look at the culture heritage. Some are official opinion, more of political influenced; some are free in thinking. While, some lectures, for me, are too simple, just talking about what fashion was or is, but not about fashion theory.

To your lecture, it is new for me to think about the emotional impact when looking into the movie. In Germany, there are theories, also in fashion, trying to speak about emotion and it would be interesting if I send you some papers. I agree with the contend. The movie you talked about is not an art film and anyone can get the structure without intellectual difficulty. But in the analyzing part, instead of the analysis of the movie with some thesis, I think, it would be better to show more pictures, analyzing with more visual impression.

（编辑：卢幸妮）